



2019

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### Recommended Citation

Peters, Malea and Steffen, Brandon, "Evolution of Occupational Therapy Practice: Life History of John White Jr. PhD, OTR/L, FAOTA" (2019). *Oral History Student Papers*. 57.  
<https://commons.und.edu/ot-oral-histories-papers/57>

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Evolution of Occupational Therapy Practice: Life History of John White Jr. PhD, OTR/L,  
FAOTA

University of North Dakota

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### **Abstract**

*Objective:* The purpose of the study is to provide current and future generations of occupational therapists a view of the history and how occupational therapy practice has evolved from its inception to current practice through the life history stories of occupational therapists who have held leadership roles at the national level and beyond. It is anticipated that the life history process will be a powerful way to gather this information.

*Method:* The participant was assigned to the project directors through purposive sampling. Two, 60-minute, semi-structured interviews, guided by the Kawa model, were conducted with Dr. White through a video chat application at the University of North Dakota School of Medicine and Health Sciences. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and then broken into codes, categories, themes, and a final assertion.

*Results:* The predominant categories that represented the major elements of his career were Leadership and Involvement, Education and Work Experiences, and the Impact of Occupational Therapy.

*Conclusion:* Dr. White is a passionate, knowledgeable, and proficient leader who has created positive change for the profession of occupational therapy. The passion Dr. White has for occupational therapy is shown through his multiple leadership positions, international work and travel, and work with occupational therapy students. Dr. White serves as an inspiration for many, and he is a great example of an occupational therapist that many aspire to achieve.

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to examine the work of Dr. White and gain insight through his experiences and leadership opportunities in the profession of occupational therapy. Dr. White

is currently an assistant professor for the Occupational Therapy program at Pacific University in Hillsboro, Oregon.

The researchers conducted two 1-hour semi-structured interviews via video call with Dr. White. For the interview, the researchers were located on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor of the University of North Dakota School of Medicine and Health Sciences in a quiet room. Dr. White was located in a classroom at the Pacific University campus in Hillsboro, Oregon.

This life history is one of 30 life history interviews, which are part of a larger project, *Histories of Individuals Who Have Been Influential in Developing Occupational Therapy (OT) at the National Level and Beyond*. The purpose of the study is to provide current and future generations of occupational therapists a view of the history and how occupational therapy practice has evolved from its inception to current practice through the life history stories of occupational therapists who have held leadership roles at the national level and beyond. It is anticipated that the life history process will be a powerful way to gather this information.

### **Literature Review**

As Dr. White has progressed through his career, he has made his way through important and impactful events in history. Starting in the 1980s, there was a paradigm shift from a mechanistic paradigm to the new emerging paradigm, which focused on returning to the use of occupation in the profession (Cole & Tufano, 2008). During this time, Dr. White was entering the workforce as a new graduate occupational therapist.

In the 1980s, the term “occupational science” was developed and defined as getting a better understanding of the form, function, and meaning of occupation (Cole & Tufano, 2008).

Occupational science plays an important role in Dr. White’s personal and professional life. One

of Dr. White's major accomplishments in his career was being inducted in the FAOTA for his role in "Building bridges between occupational therapy and occupational science." An article by Wilcock (2004) stated that the study of occupational science is not only beneficial to occupational therapists, but to almost all other professions, agencies, and disciplines, as occupation is pertinent to all human beings. Along with this, the author reported how the mission of an occupational scientist is "to advance world health, well-being and justice by energizing a worldwide network of individuals, groups, and organizations to research, debate and activate towards equity of opportunity for all people, in accordance with their occupational nature" (Wilcock, 2004, p. 7). With Dr. White's education in occupational therapy and occupational science, he has been able to bring the two professions' ideologies together to create better healthcare for tomorrow, one which embraces the importance of occupation to all.

During the 1990s, the American with Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed into law by President George H. W. Bush, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of individuals with a disability (AOTA, 2017). The ADA provides individuals with disabilities the same opportunities to employment, state and local government, public accommodations, transportation, commercial facilities, and telecommunications (U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division Disability Rights Section, 2009). Nine years after the law was signed, Dr. White's dissertation work to complete his degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Occupational Science in 1999 was completed and titled, "Occupation and Adaptation: An Ethnographic Study of Ten People with Disabilities using Title I of the ADA to Fight Employment Discrimination." This suggests that the signing of the American with Disabilities Act had an impact on Dr. White's role in occupational therapy.

Dr. White stressed the importance of networking to create connections. According to Janasz and Forret (2007), the skill of networking with others is crucial for improving social capital and

enhancing an individual's career success. Additionally, networking helps secure employment opportunities and provides opportunities for important information or recourses when needed (Janasz & Forret, 2007).

### **Theory**

The Kawa model was used to guide this life history study. This model uses the metaphor of a river to describe life's journey with a focus on turning points (Teoh & Iwama, 2015). The Kawa Model is broken into five sections: River flow (depicting the life flow and the person priorities), river banks (depicting ones environment/context, social and physical factors that are present in their life), rocks (representing the obstacles and challenges one has previously and currently working through), driftwood (identifying the influencing factors of one's self such as personal traits, abilities, or beliefs), and spaces (opportunities for enhancement) (Teoh & Iwama, 2015). Using the Kawa Model as a guide, the researchers were able to create interview questions that led them to find five different sectors of one's life history.

Using the Kawa model to guide the process of the life history study was appropriate because it allowed the researchers to identify key points in the participant's life and their viewpoint through a semi-structured interview. The interview schedule was guided by questions that involved each of the five sectors of the model. Overall, the process can achieve the aim of the model which is "not to follow a particular procedure, but rather in the explanations that the client gives about their experiences of day to day living" to achieve a person's full life process (Toeh & Iwama, 2015, p. 7). The Kawa model guides the large life history project by piecing together the history of occupational therapy and describing its evolution.

### **Description of Participant**

Information on Dr. White was gathered through his curriculum vitae (CV) and in-depth interview. Dr. White is a well-established occupational therapist who has several achievements and leadership positions in the field of occupational therapy. Dr. White worked to develop his educational background through accomplishing various degrees, including a Bachelor of Science from Wofford College Spartanburg in 1974, Bachelor of Science in Occupational Therapy from Medical University of South Carolina in June of 1978, Master of Arts in Occupational Therapy from University of South California in May of 1992, and Doctor of Philosophy in Occupational Science in May of 1999.

Dr. White has worked as an occupational therapy practitioner in many states, countries, and settings for over 33 years, primarily in adult rehabilitation, with his most recent practice in psychosocial rehabilitation in criminal justice & addiction recovery.

Dr. White started working in the educational setting as a teaching assistant for the University of Southern California Department of Occupational Therapy in 1989. Over the years, Dr. White has progressed his way through the teaching hierarchy. Dr. White was the Program Director at Pacific University from 2002-2015 and currently resides as a Professor at Pacific University for the Department of Occupational Therapy since 2008. His teaching has included classes for both the Master of Occupational Therapy curriculum, as well as the OTD curriculum. Dr. White has written and been a part of 15 publications, including those in books, such as Willard and Spackman's Occupational Therapy, the Journal of Occupational Science, OT Practice, and many others. Some of the larger accomplishments that Dr. White has achieved include being invited as the keynote speaker for the Japanese Society for the Study of Occupation in 2014. In 2015, Dr. White was inducted as a Fellow of the American Occupational

Therapy Association (FAOTA) for “Building bridges between occupational therapy and occupational science” at the AOTA National Conference and Expo in Nashville, TN. Among Dr. White’s many accomplishments through his career as an occupational therapist, he still finds time to enjoy the little things such as playing guitar, camping, and spending time with his wife and daughter.

## **Methodology**

### **Study design**

The study design used was a qualitative life history approach. This study design allowed the focus to be on the participant’s involvement in the evolution of occupational therapy practice. The study allowed the researchers to understand how the participant has come to be the individual, and the occupational therapist he is today, through sharing his personal life stories and experiences.

### **Participant selection**

Dr. White was selected from a participant list compiled through purposive sampling by the project directors. Informed consent was obtained prior to the interview, and the project was reviewed by the UND Institutional Review Board and because of the study design, the formal IRB process was waived. There were no gatekeeper issues since initial contact was made through the course instructors.

### **Data Collection**

Data was collected using the one-on-one interview and document review from Dr. White’s curriculum vitae (CV). The student researchers completed two, 60-minute interviews



with Dr. White by a video conference call through Zoom. The researchers' interview took place in a secluded room on the fourth floor of the University of North Dakota School of Medicine and Health Sciences building. Dr. White's interview was conducted in Hillsboro, Oregon at Pacific University.

The semi-structured interview was guided by an interview schedule prepared by the project directors; the questions on the interview schedule were designed to be used with all the individuals interviewed as part of the larger project. The researchers were allowed to modify or add interview questions as needed for each specific interview. Researchers modified and added questions to develop an interview schedule that was more specific to Dr. White's career, as well as adding questions based on the Kawa model to gain a deeper understanding of the turning points of his life.

The interview schedule contained a total of 16 main questions. The interviewers could not ask all 16 questions due to time constraints and question/answer overlap. Each interview was audio and video recorded through the video conference call app, Zoom, as well as audio recorded through both interviewer's phones using the Voice Memos app.

### **Trustworthiness**

The researchers established trustworthiness by taking the necessary steps to ensure rigor throughout the process of conducting the study. Member checking was utilized by sending the participant, Dr. White, a copy of both interview transcripts to ensure there were no discrepancies during the transcription process. Reflective journaling was completed by both researchers through every step of the life history process to assist with eliminating any bias. Both researchers collaborated, reviewed, and analyzed the data to code the transcriptions of the interviews

properly. These necessary steps taken by both researchers helped to contribute to the validity and reliability of the study.

### **Data analysis**

Both interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. The researchers started the data analysis process by completing the initial memoing of the transcription. Afterward, they identified 25 codes from the transcription. The student researchers included codes that were relevant within Dr. White's career in occupational therapy and excluded codes that were not related to the purpose of the study. The codes were then collapsed into three categories: Leadership and Involvement, Education and Work Experiences, and Impact of Occupational Therapy. There were two to three themes that emerged from each category. A final assertion was developed based on the categories and themes that were identified throughout the data analysis process.

### **Findings/Results**

Dr. White's life experiences have helped to develop his current role in occupational therapy. Through data analysis and coding, the researchers found three major categories along with corresponding themes, which are outlined and described below. The themes are a reflection of the important stances, beliefs, and values Dr. White has taken in his life. The Kawa model helped guide the data analysis process by identifying turning points and significant events that occurred within Dr. White's life (see appendix A).

#### **Leadership and Involvement**

**Theme 1: Dr. White embraces social networking and values the connections this has had on his professional involvement and has facilitated his ability to mentor others in their professional development.**

Dr. White finds the importance of being involved at the national level in a variety of leadership roles, as it helps to expand the social network individuals have with others. He has found that being involved at the national level, such as attending the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) conferences, has helped him to see the value of social networking with others in the profession. Dr. White has seen how social networking can help to enhance his professional involvement, which is why he mentors and encourages students, and other occupational therapists in the profession, to be involved at the national level and help gain knowledge and skills from other occupational therapists. When giving advice about becoming involved at the national level, Dr. White stated:

Through the network of individuals that you meet that are remarkable people, incredibly talented, and incredibly bright ... you'll develop skills that you never imagined you would be able to have and develop depending on you know how you would want to be involved.

Dr. White identified how his leadership role in the Society for the Study of Occupation USA (SSOUSA) has helped to expand his social network, which helped him stay updated on different projects that others in the profession have taken on. He stated:

It [SSOUSA] has been a very important part of my life [...] All of those activities have built a circle of friends that now reach around the world and we get to see each other, you

know, at least every couple years through these meetings and those friendships are powerful in a social way, but they also keep me in touch with things that are happening.

Overall, social networking has made a huge impact on Dr. White in being able to connect with others in the profession.

**Theme 2: Dr. White values the balance between knowing how much to challenge yourself and knowing when to take a break to nurture yourself and restore other roles.**

Dr. White believes that there is a need to challenge yourself within your practice as an occupational therapist. His fieldwork supervisor helped him understand the need to challenge yourself and expand your knowledge and skills, to better help the clients that you work with. He has since then challenged himself in a variety of ways by being involved in occupational therapy roles at the state and national levels. After reflecting on his ability to challenge himself within his work in the profession, Dr. White stated:

I sometimes wonder, maybe I took the easy route on that one. Maybe I just did smooth my way through that one. And, most of the time it makes me want to go back and look at a little bit more critically and for the self-reflection to kind of lead to a more digging deeper and figuring out what it is that's needed to make it happen.

On the other hand, Dr. White understands the importance of taking a break to take care of yourself outside of a leadership role. After discussing his many duties of being chair of SSOUSA and how he might have “overdone it,” Dr. White stated, “My other advice to you as a budding leader is to know when you need to take a break, either for the good of society or the good of your own health and your own family.”

## **Education and Work Experiences**

**Theme 1: Dr. White's past experiences in fieldwork, teaching, and travel have helped him to find his role in occupational therapy.**

After being accepted into the occupational therapy program at the Medical University of South Carolina, Dr. White was able to experience what occupational therapists do in practice while on a trip to Germany, by stating how “he [the occupational therapist] showed me almost the entire gamut of what occupational therapy can be, you know, parents of soldiers who had had strokes, soldiers who had been injured, soldiers with PTSD, [...]” This experience allowed him to get a better idea of what the role of an occupational therapist is, which helped to motivate him to pursue a career in occupational therapy. Along with this, Dr. White’s fieldwork experience has helped him understand the value of continuing to challenge himself to build upon his skills in practice. When discussing valuable advice that Dr. White received from his fieldwork supervisor, he stated:

She said [the fieldwork supervisor], ‘You know John, you’re a charming guy, and you have a sense of competence and confidence about you that’s very persuasive to people, and I just want to caution you that if you rely on that to get by, you’ll probably get through a whole career fine, but it’ll also mean that you haven’t challenged yourself to really push and to go beyond that easy ability to make things happen to really dig deeper and to make sure that what you’re doing is truly as competent as it appears to be on first look for people.’ It was a phenomenal challenge, and I’ve kept that in mind ever since wondering, ‘Am I just smooshing my way through this situation.’

Years later, Dr. White discovered that he wanted to pursue teaching occupational therapy after traveling to Malaysia to complete service work, where he was the first occupational therapist to set up services at a teaching hospital. His experience helped him realize the skills he had to teach people about occupational therapy, which lead him to want to pursue going back to school to become a professor stating:

I realized that if I were going to go back to grad school, always before I'd said, 'I'll go back for physiology or exercise science or rehabilitation science,' but when I came back [from Malaysia], I knew I needed to go back to OT. Particularly because I realized that I had some teaching skills.

**Theme 2: Education has been a cornerstone of Dr. White's personal and professional career development.**

Dr. White's educational experiences helped develop him into the occupational therapist he is today. Dr. White did not think of pursuing a career in occupational therapy until he was not accepted into the Physical Therapy program at the Medical University of South Carolina, but instead got accepted into the bachelor's level Occupational Therapy Program there. During his fieldwork experience with another student, who was in a master's level occupational therapy program, Dr. White realized that there was a difference between a bachelor's degree and master's degree in Occupational Therapy by stating that "I was very impressed with her command of the OT knowledge base [...] It woke me up to the fact that there might actually be a difference between bachelor's and master's level education". Years later, Dr. White decided to enroll in a master's level occupational therapy program at the University of Southern California which later lead him to pursue a PhD in occupational science. His educational experiences

helped him to see the value in his education to expand his knowledge within the profession of occupational therapy by stating:

One of the things that it [master's level education in occupational therapy] did was scratch the surface of the whole body of knowledge in anthropology, neuroscience, psychology, [...] that help us be better as a profession. And that made me want to go to the PhD program in occupational science, and that made me appreciate doctoral education. That journey helped me see that, as I became an educator in OT, that the move toward master's education was a worthwhile endeavor.

**Theme 3: Dr. White finds great value and potential in the connection between occupational science and occupational therapy.**

Dr. White has found that his knowledge in occupational science has helped him to understand the meaning of occupation and how it applies to the profession of occupational therapy. During his educational experience in receiving a bachelor's degree in occupational therapy, Dr. White was taught in a reductionistic way and did not fully understand the true meaning of occupation. He mentioned how it was not until he pursued a PhD in occupational science that he really understood what occupation was in the profession, by stating:

My education in occupational science helped me understand why it [occupational therapy] works and how it works in the power of occupation, and teaching it, I had to really understand it, and that enabled me to embrace it at a whole new level and to see how student's lives were transformed when they were taught in a way that helped them understand occupation.

After this discovery, Dr. White became passionate about finding the link between occupational science and occupational therapy within his research. When discussing he won an award for his research, he stated:

I received the award [FAOTA] for serving as a bridge between occupational science and occupational therapy and advancing the cause of both through that bridge [...] it was so exciting because it recognized my commitment to occupational science and occupational therapy.

### **Impact of Occupational Therapy**

**Theme 1: Dr. White believes the power of occupation, effectively applied, helps to transform the lives of clients and students.**

Dr. White values the power of occupation to transform the lives of clients, as that is what he believes occupational therapy is all about. When asked what occupational therapy has meant to him, Dr. White stated:

The power to transform lives. The power to transform the lives of students who get to see it work [occupation], and the power of occupation to transform the lives of clients who get to experience what it means to recapture lost occupation and the identity that accompanies that transition.

He has also seen through his experiences how occupation can help to transform the lives of clients. He discussed how individuals having difficulties with addiction experience a loss of occupations and stated:



They never got to see the full side of what a full occupational life was like, and the older they got, the more shrank as, the deeper into addiction they got. And so, they're learning for the first time, how to do some of these things and again, it just speaks to the power of occupation to transform a person's immediate mood and sense of self, and if sustained over time, you can transform it in a much bigger way.

He promotes students and occupational therapists to use occupation, as it encompasses the whole profession of occupational therapy, by giving advice to "look in your career for ways to use occupation that will give you those tear-inducing, heart-thumping stories to tell about OT because that's where our power lies."

**Theme 2: Dr. White finds the importance of occupational therapists' application of occupational justice reduces occupational deprivation and can empower clients to be self-advocates.**

Dr. White believes it is important for his students in the occupational therapy program at Pacific University to understand and embrace occupational justice in order to help to implement it into the profession as a practicing occupational therapist. He mentions how if students are able to learn about what occupational justice truly is, they will be able to use and advocate for it during practice. Dr. White mentioned how "If you really want to move occupational justice forward and social justice forward, you've got to figure out some kind of way to advocate for it" Dr. White has also identified a need for occupational justice to help clients advocate for themselves. He stated, "I believe that because occupational justice has become more commonly understood term across the profession, that it just can't help but carry people into the realm of advocacy and at least recognizing the need for it." Therefore, Dr. White finds value in

occupational therapists' ability to understand occupational justice to help better advocate for clients in practice.

**Theme 3: Dr. White advocates for interprofessional work to provide quality care for clients, as he values the connections between SLP and other professionals.**

Dr. White believes there is a need to embrace interprofessional teamwork within practice by starting with educating students about the importance of interprofessional work in order for them to gain a better understanding of it as a professional. When asked about the impact of incorporating interprofessional education when working with different professions, he stated:

I think the importance has been building, and I think it's mostly happening more actively at the educational level and the education programs recognizing that, if we start educating our students on the role of interprofessional work, then they're much more likely to be a professional in the future.

Dr. White demonstrated the importance of interprofessional teamwork by bringing up his experiences with working with the Aphasia Network. The Aphasia Network is a volunteer project where occupational therapists and speech-language pathologists work together to help individuals with aphasia and caregivers develop the skills that they need. Through this example, he explained how occupational therapists and speech-language pathologists take on each other's roles at times to better reach the needs of clients, which ultimately helps occupational therapists and other professionals gain a better appreciation of the interprofessional team, by stating:

They get to see how their role [as an occupational therapist] interacts with another profession's role, and how sometimes you might have to switch off, and you might have to adopt some stronger SLP characteristics in your practice. And you can learn from their

expertise and appreciate, ‘oh my god, supportive communication is so easy for them,’ and those SLP students are going ‘I’m going to have to help you transfer her onto a toilet.’

**Final Assertion:** As a leader in occupational science and occupational therapy, Dr. White has found value in the impact that OT brings to the lives of clients and the connection he has with others within the profession. His unique path to occupational therapy has led him to roles in work, leadership, and education.

### **Discussion/Conclusion**

The relevance of this study was to provide current and future generations of occupational therapists a view of the history and how occupational therapy practice has evolved from its inception to current practice through the life history story of Dr. White. Being an occupational therapist to Dr. White has meant having the power to transform the lives of many individuals through the use of occupation. Through first applying to physical therapy school at the Medical University in South Carolina, but not getting in and ending up in the new program of occupational therapy, Dr. White has come a long way to create the impact he has made in the occupational therapy profession.

As Dr. White progressed through life, he has made many great friends and connections that have helped him to become who he is today. The relationship between the Kawa Model and the life history of Dr. White is evident through the findings represented above. Dr. White identified what his life has consisted of, including how he started as an occupational therapist, examples of barriers in his life, and what has led him to his success as an occupational therapist, a teacher, a mentor, and a leader.

The literature supports that Dr. White has encountered many events in time that may have

impacted him and his practice, such as the occupational therapy paradigm shift, the creation of the term occupational science, and the signing of the ADA into law. He has dedicated much of his life to the field of occupational therapy and occupational science in ways new graduates aspire to one day achieve. He has been instrumental in many lives through his teachings, leadership, and occupational therapy practice. The occupational therapy community should be proud to have Dr. White be a part of it.

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## Appendix

Life History of John A. White, Jr., Ph.D., FAOTA, OTR/L

Malea Peters, OTS and Brandon Steffen, OTS

Codes	<div> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ SSOUA</li> <li>❖ Membership</li> <li>❖ Conferences</li> <li>❖ Service and Scholarship</li> <li>❖ Networking</li> <li>❖ FAOTA</li> <li>❖ Reward and sacrifice of volunteerism</li> <li>❖ Correctional center</li> <li>❖ Aphasia Network</li> <li>❖ Need to challenge self</li> <li>❖ Know when to take breaks</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Occupational Science</li> <li>❖ Personal and professional development</li> <li>❖ Finding OT</li> <li>❖ Teaching</li> <li>❖ International travel</li> <li>❖ OT degree changes</li> <li>❖ Application of learning</li> <li>❖ Knowledge expansion</li> <li>❖ Fieldwork</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Power of occupation</li> <li>❖ Transformation</li> <li>❖ Occupational justice</li> <li>❖ Interprofessional teamwork</li> <li>❖ Advocacy</li> </ul> </div>		
Categories	Leadership and Involvement	Education and Work Experiences	Impact of Occupational Therapy
Themes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Dr. White embraces social networking and values the connections this has had on his professional involvement and has facilitated his ability to mentor others in their professional development.</li> <li>2. Dr. White values the balance between knowing how much to challenge yourself and knowing when to take a break to nurture yourself and restore other roles.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Dr. White's past experiences in fieldwork, teaching, and travel have helped him to find his role in occupational therapy.</li> <li>2. Education has been a cornerstone of Dr. White's personal and professional career development.</li> <li>3. Dr. White finds great value and potential in the connection between occupational science and occupational therapy.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Dr. White believes the power of occupation, effectively applied, helps to transform the lives of clients and students.</li> <li>2. Dr. White finds the importance of occupational therapists' application of occupational justice reduces occupational deprivation and can empower clients to be self-advocates.</li> <li>3. Dr. White advocates for interprofessional work to provide quality care for clients, as he values the connections between SLP and other professionals.</li> </ol>
Assertion	<p>As a leader in occupational science and occupational therapy, Dr. White has found value in the impact that OT brings to the lives of clients and the connection he has with others within the profession. Dr. White's unique path to occupational therapy has led him to roles in practice, leadership, and education.</p>		